

Gilgit 1947

War of Liberation or Coup d' Etat

National Defence University, Islamabad

Aamir Cheema, Ph.D scholar

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aamircheema@outlook.com 0302-5478100

In November 1947, Gilgit Scouts under a British officer rebelled against the Sikh governor and resultantly the Gilgit area acceded to Dominion of Pakistan. Consequently, it cut off the land routes not only between Russia and Dominion of India but also between Central and South Asia. This event is hailed as an act of patriotism by the natives and official historians. This paper argues that this independence was not an isolated affair of the natives, rather it had the blessings and support of the British officials as well.. British Forward Policy in India was cultured over decades by individual adventurous officers, with the lapse of paramountcy this Forward Policy was bound to die on the appointed day, but it did not; rather individual British officer steered it towards Pakistan through a coup d'état . This paper concludes, that , this coup d'état was planned and executed by Frontier Officers only and did not had the support of the British Government . British India 'Forward Policy' did not elapsed on the appointed day rather by virtue of its inertia it lived on and was transferred to Pakistan .

Gilgit 1947; Last Chukker of Forward Policy

Introduction

British became a paramount power in India east of River Sutlej after defeating Marathas in 1805, in the same time period their commercial hold over India was threatened by the Napoleon and this led British East India Company{BEIC} to enter into diplomatic treaties with the formidable Sikh ruler of Punjab Maharajah Ranjit Singh who held sovereignty and paramountcy in the West of River Sutlej extending towards Persia and Afghanistan . By 1840 the threat of France mainly from west was replaced with the Russian expansion from the North West , the Sikhs were defeated in two successive battles fought between the BEIC troops and the Sikhs Misls in 1842-1846 resulting in the annexation of Punjab however the Afghanistan still remained an unpredictable neighbour for the British. BEIC had taken over the legal responsibility of Ranjeet Singh's empire which by itself was based upon the tacit mixture of diplomacy and militancy. Area West of River Indus from Peshawar down South Dera Ghazi Khan was divided into six Frontier Districts {FD} a separate force the Punjab Irregular Force{PIF} was also raised which was put under command of Punjab Government instead of a central command¹³ .These diplomatic ,commercial and military moves that took place in this effort to secure its Western and especially North Western approaches by the BEIC and later by the British Crown and parliament were termed as the **Great Game** by the one player Arthur Connolly in 1822¹ and later made famous by the Rudyard Kipling .

This Great Game started in 1820's with First two chukkers resulting in first {1839-1842} and second Afghan {1878-1880} wars and before the third chukker{1919,Third Anglo Afghan War} the British had moved extreme north in Hindu Kush some 300 miles north of Khyber Pass the most traditional route of invasion from Central Asia into plains of Indo-Gangetic civilisation to safeguard the two more vital passes Baroghul and Ishkoman , as it was not economically viable to garrison the British troops next to the passes thus the historical communication hubs like Chitral for Baroghil pass route and Gilgit for the Ishkoman became strategic in nature. Gilgit was more strategic in importance because it connects to China,Afghanistan and Kashmir,it was the starting point of Himalayas .An ideal listening post for the Russian invasion and expansion. The Durand Line Treaty of 1893 defines the extent of British territory in the west with Afghanistan in which a mere 60 miles wide mountain strip Wakhan Corridor separates British India from Russian Khanates of Tajikistan,Wakhan is also 100 miles away from Gilgit there fore this town became a prize.

Gilgit a small mountainous town at an elevation of 4500 feet surrounded by lofty mountains including Nanga Parbat ,Haramosh , Rakaposhi{all above 7000 Meters}and over a hundred other mountains over 6000 Meters high is the opening to the fabulous Central Asia {or vice versa} with Baroghul, Mintaka and Ishkoman passes leading to Central Asia . Gilgit and surroundings including small states like Punial and Yasin were militarily annexed by the Dogras in 1860's after fierce but small wars and made part of Jammu & Kashmir{J&K} state , one of the

¹ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game*[London;John Murray,2006],p.1.

over 500 princely states of India , J&K in size was bigger than Denmark, Holland and Belgium put together and as such was given special status by the Viceroy of India on behalf of Crown. Prime ministers Disraeli and Gladstone had varying policy on countering the Russian threat, one school of thought favoured a '**Forward Policy**' which promoted an aggressive posture having British military contingents stationed as far forward as possible there by making Afghanistan a dependency of British India, the other school of thought favoured an isolationist policy ,there by rejecting the very idea of any Russian invasion to India as not practical, they considered River Indus as an viable and economical defense line,in the end it was Forward Policy that emerged winner.

Britain thus engineered the western borders of Afghanistan and Russians also agreed on having a clear sphere of influence, a treaty was signed with Russia on the extent of spheres of both empires in 1873{ which later became the boundary between Afghanistan and Russia} on one hand and between India and Afghanistan the Durand Line in 1893 and with China in 1913.It is close to Gilgit that these four empires British India,China and Afghanistan meet with a strip of sixty miles of Afghanistan in Wakhan separating India and Russia.

Over period of time the objectives of forward policy remained identical the safeguarding of India's north western approach from Russia and preserving the sanctity of the Durand Line. Gilgit Agency which represented the Gilgit town and adjoining half a dozen small states was established in 1889² British used military power to establish their garrisons and writ in these far flung remote mountainous terrain with a focus to keep the passes under control and for this purpose the Colonel Algernon Durand remained in Gilgit between 1892-1897. He in the process carried out considerable military expeditions to subjugate the independent small but strategically important states of Hunza and Nagar who in fact defined the western end or the starting point of the Durand Line .

Gilgit was leased by the British from ruler of J&K in 1935 for sixty years with an intent to keep this listening post of Central Asia under their direct control. Gilgit Scouts a militia of 500 men recruited exclusively from the native states , trained and commanded by the British officers, maintained jointly by the British and J&K state was meant to keep law and order in the agency and to act as the listening post for any invasion. This leasing of Gilgit Agency is a valid argument to support the usefulness of forward policy in post First World War scenario.

Post World War 2 resulted in Labour Party coming to power and discussions with the Indians started on the transfer of power to them. The India was divided on the practical aspects of transfer of power with Muslims who had been the loyal and in majority in Indian Military insisting on a separate country Pakistan and British hostile Indian Congress disagreeing with it and insisting on a unified India. On 1st June 1947 the partition plan was announced by the Viceroy Earl Mountbatten and later endorsed by the British parliament on 17th July 1947 under India Independence Act, it divided the India on communal basis and gave freedom of choice to the princely states to either join Pakistan ,India or remain independent. Communist threat to India from west after transfer of power must have been a high priority among the decision makers of the British policy .The lease of Gilgit Agency surprisingly was revoked and on 1st August 1947 Union Jack was replaced by J&K flag. However British did maintained other

² Alastair Lamb,*Incomplete Partition Genesis of Kashmir Dispute*,{Oxford,Karachi,2002},p,105.

Agencies like Khyber ,Mohmand etc. This move of British just on the eve of transfer of power apparently seems to indicate an utter disengagement with the forward policy yet events leading to 1st November 1947 clearly dictate that this was not the case and certain British officers seem to be so much involved in the spirit of forward policy that they acted at their own for the continuance of the policy.

J&K was overwhelmingly Muslim yet ruled by the Hindu Dogra dynasty, not an unusual thing among the princely states yet because of its size, strategic location and natural resources especially the water it became a matter of life line for Pakistan. After transfer of power by the paramount power on 14th August 1947 two new dominions took birth Pakistan and India with Mountbatten becoming the Governor General of India and Mohammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan. The hypothesis of a peaceful migration of population from one dominion to other was shattered by the communal brutality displayed by both Sikhs & Muslims which started in first week of March 1947 in Punjab and reached its crescendo in August 1947, the flashing point was the awarding of partial Gurdaspur District in eastern Punjab having a Muslim majority of 0.8 % to India instead of Pakistan³. The Radcliffe Boundary Award was headed by a British barrister and Pakistani historians do allege that this award has something to do with the fact that India's first premier Nehru belonged to Kashmir and he had an affair with the viceroy's wife Edina Mountbatten, ironically this district thus became India's sole link to Kashmir and Central Asia.

Almost all princely states had announced their accession to one dominion or the other yet J&K along with few other states including Hyderabad Deccan, Bahawalpur and Kalat remained independent, testing Pakistan's nerves and in first week of October 1947 the Muslim tribesmen of Durand Line attacked J&K state and almost reached the capital Srinagar when on 27th October 1947 Maharaja of Kashmir signed the letter of accession to India which was conditionally accepted by the Mountbatten. It is bit odd that Mountbatten did lay a condition, that plebiscite has to be held in the state to ascertain the will of people. However the Indian army troops were airlifted from Delhi to Srinagar and they not only secured the Srinagar Airfield but also wrested the initiative from the tribal.

On 1st November 1947 the Gilgit Scouts an all Muslim armed unit which was raised, trained and commanded by the British officers being paid by the Maharaja of J&K carried out a *coup d'état under a British officer Major Brown who put under arrest the Dogra governor Brigadier Ghansara Singh and sent the accession of Gilgit province of J&K state to Pakistan within hours. It was also a rebellion because these Gilgit Scouts or more precisely the only two British officers of Gilgit province attacked with Scouts on the 6th J&K Regiment at Bumji and defeated it, it was also a war of independence as independence was proclaimed by the Gilgit with its own president and field marshal.* Gilgit Scouts a force of about 600 native soldiers commanded by a 24 years old British major of Scottish origin Major William Brown who in mysterious circumstances relinquished his King George's Commission and became a subject of maharajah of J&K on the advice of his superiors who all had opted to serve Pakistan after transfer of power. Major Brown along with his handpicked second in command Captain Mattheson also a Scottish carried out a coup d'état against the Dogra governor with the help of Gilgit Scouts on 1st November 1947 and immediately wired the letter of accession of Gilgit and more importantly of Hunza and Nagar strategic princely states.

³ Compilaion of Official Documents, Volume 2, The Partition of Punjab 1947, National Documentation Centre 1983, second edition by Sang-e- Meel Publishers, Lahore, 1993. Appendix IV, pp-552-553.

In post 1947 the Gilgit Agency remained part of Pakistan where as the remaining part of Jammu & Kashmir state were governed by Pakistan and India as an after effect of the cease fire line of 1948. In 1954 Pakistan joined western military alliances and in 1960 gave bases to America. In 1965 both Pakistan and India again went to war over Kashmir ,six years later both these countries were again at war. ***However it was the military invasion of Afghanistan by the Russians in 1979 just thirty years after the Gilgit accession to Pakistan which highlights its strategic importance in all these years.***

The literature regarding the Gilgit Accession can be segregated into the categories originating from India, Pakistan, United Kingdom and Gilgit itself. Not surprisingly all have different versions of the event which is not unusual as all the literature pertaining to the united India, Raj and especially the transfer of power have same thread. In case of Gilgit accession the Indians accuse British officers of betraying their oath, Pakistanis are not willing even to admit the very presence and participation of Major Brown in the act, British tend to concentrate more on the Kashmir issue rather than the Gilgit, the Gilgitis themselves are not unanimous on the conduct of the whole episode. Almost all the key players have written their autobiographies narrating the tale, it is the years of their publishing which has caused much of difference.

Gilgit Rebellion written by Major William Brown the commandant of Scouts was published in 1994⁴ almost ten years after Brown's death and its preface admits that 'few pages have been omitted' moreover the original copy of the draft typed in 1949 was lost and book was printed basing upon a carbon copy yet it remains the most authentic first hand account of the events and it is through his words that one comes across the chain of events that took place, how Major Brown planned and executed the coup

*'our object was to perform a coup d'etat in Gilgit with as little bloodshed and disturbance as possible, and then accede to Pakistan of our own accord... Pakistan would surely be as anxious as the British were to guard the northern frontiers against aggression and infiltration from Central Asia'*⁵.

Major Brown further writes .

*'The big question of the moment is which side of the fence is the Maharaja of Kashmir going to jump? if he has the sense to jump towards Pakistan good and well, but if he accedes to India the people here will not stand for it. There will be an upheaval of some sort, the question is what are we going to do ?are we going to support the Kashmir regime as we are duty bound to do so ?if we do, surely we shall be acting against our own democratic sentiments, which could never agree with the hundred thousand Muslim inhabitants of the Gilgit province being forced against their wills to become members of the Indian union, or shall we actively join and naturally lead the revolution in favour of Pakistan which will undoubtedly take place?'*⁶

Major Brown gives an impression as if the whole rebellion which he lead and planned was mainly due to his sense of duty, there are indicators in his autobiography which leads to the conclusion that he{Brown} was not alone in this planning and other senior British officers especially Colonel Bacon and

⁴ William Brown, *Gilgit Rebellion*, {Ibex,Islamabad,1994}Book is not available for commercial distribution ,it is based upon personal diary of Major William Brown.

⁵ Ibid,p,115.

⁶ Ibid,p,145.

Major General Scott had an important and decisive role in this accession ,but the question then arises why?.

Lieutenant General {retired} Dr M.L. Chibber of Indian Army writes ‘Major Brown was emotionally attached to Pakistan’⁷ Chibber further writes ‘ Lieutenant Colonel Roger Bacon was quite obviously the author of the planned coup d’etat’⁸. This Colonel Bacon was the commandant of Gilgit Scouts from 1943-1947 and it was he who earmarked and briefed Major Brown before handing him the command and he himself {Bacon} opted to serve Pakistan after transfer of power and was appointed as the political agent in Khyber Agency ,Major Brown remained in touch with him throughout the turbulent period and it was him {Bacon} to whom Major Brown send the accession telegram. Same theme is adopted by other Indian writers, Major General Kuldip Singh Bajwa {retired} writes ‘In the North, on 1st November 1947 British officers in the Gilgit Scouts staged a coup and handed over the strategic Gilgit Agency to Pakistan’.⁹ The official history of Indian Army notes ‘ The British officers...proved themselves hostile to J&K government and took leading part in the pro-Pakistan treachery at Gilgit’.¹⁰

On the other hand Pakistan Army official history about the Kashmir events from 14th August 1947-June 1948 whose compilation started in 1954 redrafted in 1961 and finally published as a restricted issue only for armed forces of Pakistan admits that

‘no official records have been made public by both Pakistan and India...subject has been neglected by the historians...historians feel that this war confined to a rather secluded corner of this sub continent made little impact on contemporary world events.’¹¹

What is more surprising is the total omission of any reference to Major Brown or accession of Gilgit to Pakistan. This may be explained with the fact that Brown’s autobiography was published in 1994 and as such no first hand account was available before that, yet it still fails to answer the key question that why the role of British officers have been totally omitted and even more glaring is the fact that their role has been portrayed in a negative manner ‘The British officers of the corps {Gilgit Scouts} however came to know of the scouts concerted decision {Of mutiny} and tried to overawe the men’¹². In an another official history of Pakistan Army published in 1963 made a passing remarks about the events in Gilgit ‘ Gilgit administration was taken over by the Muslim soldiers of the state army and by the scouts’¹³, there is no mention of Major Brown.

The history of Pakistan Army published in 1999 by Brigadier Brian Cloughely the Australian military attaché in Pakistan again fails to have even a paragraph on the events leading to the 1st November 1947 and again Major Brown fails to find any space in the book, although Cloughely was able to interview the surviving nun of Baramula. In the vernacular press and publications the spotlight is on the native Muslim officers and troops, in the ‘Siachen Glacier The World Highest Battle Field’ written by Colonel Zakir in Urdu again attributes the accession of Gilgit to the Muslim elements of Gilgit Scouts.

⁷ Lieutenant General Chibber, *Pakistan’s Original Folly in Kashmir* {Manas, New Delhi, 2004} p, 55.

⁸ Ibid, p-57.

⁹ Major General Kuldip Singh Bajwa, *Jammu & Kashmir War 1947-1948 Political and Military Perspective* {Military Affairs Series, Delhi, 2004} p, 22

¹⁰ *Operations in Jammu & Kashmir 1947-1948*, Ministry of Defence ,Government of India, p-280

¹¹ *The Kashmir Campaign 1947-48*, Historical Section Pakistan Army, {Service Book Club, 2006-2007} preface.

¹² Ibid, p-5.

¹³ Major General Fazl Muqem *The Story Of Pakistan Army* {Oxford, Karachi, 1963}

The natives whom I met in my two tenures of over two years in the Gilgit Agency and the local intelligentsia all have varied interpretation of the events and that is not surprising keeping in view the tribal and ethnic diversification of the area. The names of Major Aslam Khan, Major Hassan, Major Ihsan, Major Shah Khan and Lieutenant Babur and Jarral are hotly debated to prove that it is he who has played the key role.

Since Gilgit-Baltistan formed part of Kashmir State and the more important battles were fought in the Kashmir Valley which involved troops of Pakistan Army and the tribal lashkars ,importantly this arena was close to Lahore and Rawalpindi thus the press and radio both national and international were able to record it in more details than the far north where no press reporter was ever able to reach and report because of the weather extremes.

In the official publications Gilgit Accession is again sadly missing, in the **Jinnah Papers** ,which are the official and private correspondence of first governor general of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah ‘Quaid e Azam’ the accession of Hunza and Nagar is not explained the way the accession of other dozen of states to Pakistan has been elaborated. The letter of accession of Hunza dates 3rd November 1947 and that of Nagar is 19th November 1947.

The defence committee meeting of 3rd October 1947 in which the governor and premier of North Western frontier Province{NWFP}along with the commander in chief and prime minister of Pakistan were in attendance , the issue of treaties and pacts with the tribes were discussed and it was decided to bring back the army from Waziristan, in the same meeting Prime minister of Pakistan Mr Liaqat Ali Khan stated on the issue of treaty with Chitral ‘hold it, let me check the legality of Kashmir states control over the Chitral’¹⁴ is a clear evidence of total ignorance of Pakistan’s political leadership regarding the strategic importance of Gilgit and surrounding states.

Prime Minister of India Mr Jawahar Lal Nehru speech in dominion parliament on 2nd November and again on 25th November 1947 on the issue of Kashmir had no mention of Gilgit Rebellion similarly the correspondence between prime ministers of Pakistan and India between 12-30th December 1947 had nothing about events in Gilgit¹⁵.

Professor Ahmad Hassan Dani is the Professor Emeritus in Quaid –i-Azam University and in 1989 The National Institute of Historical & Cultural Research Islamabad sponsored a research into the ‘History of Northern Areas of Pakistan’ and to date is the most authenticated work. Professor Dani states about the events of November 1947

‘Who should be given the credit for achieving this success? The group of four army officers of the Kashmir State forces, viz Colonel Hassan, Colonel Syed Durrani, Major Muhammad Khan Jarral and Lieutenant Colonel Ghulam Haider Khan claim the exclusive monopoly for themselves....Colonel Hasan Khan claims to have planned the whole thing’.¹⁶Regarding the involvement and role of British officers ,Professor Dani has quoted Group Captain Shah Khan ‘action in Gilgit was on the initiative and plan of Gilgit Scouts, Brown was informed only on 31st October night of this plan, this view is confirmed by

¹⁴ *Jinnah papers ,Volume Ten*,Ministry of Culture Pakistan

¹⁵ Poplai,ed, *Select Documents on Asian Affairs,India 1947-50,Volume One,Internal Affairs*{Oxford,Bombay,1959}

¹⁶ Dr A.H.Dani, *History of Northern Areas Of Pakistan*,{National Institute of Historical & Cultural Research,Islamabad,1989}p,329.

Babar in his article...according to Lieutenant Colonel Ghulam Haider Brown was arrested by Colonel Hasan'.¹⁷

Harry Alastair Lamb Ph.D in History from Trinity College Cambridge is perhaps the most prolific British writer on the Kashmir issue, he has written extensively on the Kashmir. Regarding the accession of Gilgit ,Lamb writes 'On 1st November 1947 Brigadier Ghansara Singh was arrested by the Gilgit Scouts whose commander Major W.Brown assisted by Captain Mathieson, on 3rd November 1947 agreed with his men that they should come out openly for Pakistan'.¹⁸ Lamb has his theory regarding the invasion of vale of Kashmir by the Indian military, 'The real goal ...was not the Vale of Kashmir but the Gilgit Agency'.¹⁹ In another book Lamb observes 'Quite a number of British officers serving in the armed forces of both India and Pakistan unofficially involved themselves in early Kashmir operations to a degree that went far beyond the bounds of benevolent neutrality...one example the affair of Major Brown and the Gilgit Agency.'²⁰

In the research field the Pakistan Higher Education Commission{HEC} has over 6000 approved thesis for the grant of Doctor of Philosophy{ Ph.D} Degree and yet only two deals with the Gilgit namely 'Study of Petroglyphs of Buddhist period along the Silk Road between Shatial and Khunjerab Pass ,Northern Areas, Pakistan' by Muhammad Arif. and 'Economy and Society in Dardistan, traditional system and impact of Change' by John Staley who submitted it in 1963 as part of Commonwealth scholarship from University of Lahore. Similarly the collection of Ph.D thesis in United Kingdom available on web have over 22 pages of index dealing with the word Kashmir and Pakistan and again none is about the Gilgit Revolt.

The material about the Gilgit Accession is sufficient yet it lacks empirical values. The official records have never been released by the Pakistan government yet they are conditionally accessible, they are mostly in NWFP government archives and also with the historical section of Pakistan army. With the making of Gilgit-Baltistan as a province the access to records is now more accessible than in the past, further the growing of confidence building measures between Pakistan and India allows a ray of hope to have a look at the records held with Indian authorities.

¹⁷ Ibid,p-402,in the footnotes,No.18,19,19a and No.20

¹⁸ Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir A Disputed Legacy 1846-1990*, {Oxford Pakistan 1993} p,118 Note No.9.

¹⁹ Ibid,p-149.

²⁰ Alastair Lamb,*Birth of A Tragedy Kashmir 1947*{Oxford,Karachi 1994}p-105.

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